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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001644

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/YERGER
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SUBJECT: LEBANON: SWISS ENVOY SEES INITIATIVE STALLED DUE
TO THE LACK OF HIZBALLAH PARTICIPATION

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: Section 1.4 (b)
) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) During an October 19 meeting with the Ambassador, Swiss Special Envoy to Lebanon Didier Pfirter said it was "unlikely" that a November meeting to further the Swiss initiative to resolve Lebanon's political crisis would take place. The main reason for the lack of optimism was the uncertainty of Hizballah participation. Hizballah knows the meeting's main focus will be on its disarmament and was playing a "defensive strategy" to stall for time. Pfirter said the clock is ticking against March 14, and if it does not push forward with a favorable presidential candidate before November 14, it could lose political cohesion within its ranks and find itself on the losing side of the political equation. End Summary.

¶2. (C) The Ambassador, DCM, and Poloff, met with Swiss Special Envoy to Lebanon Didier Pfirter and Assistant Kim Sitzler at the Ambassador's office on October 19.

SWISS ENVOY SEES INITIATIVE STALLED
DUE TO THE LACK OF HIZBALLAH PARTICIPATION

¶3. (C) Swiss Special Envoy Didier Pfirter gave his frank outlook of the Swiss initiative to resolve the Lebanese political crisis. He said it was "unlikely" that a proposed November meeting to further the Swiss initiative would take place. Pfirter said the main reason for his lack of optimism was the uncertainty of Hizballah's participation, given the announcement by Ali Fayyad (who usually represents Hizballah in the Swiss initiative) that he could not attend. Hizballah knows the meeting's main focus will be on its disarmament and security matters, subjects Hizballah would like to avoid. Overall, Hizballah is playing a "defensive strategy" to stall for time. It prefers, Pfirter believes, the current political stalemate to a political compromise that could lead to an uncertain political outcome, i.e., a Lebanese government that would be willing to take on the thorny issue of disarming Hizballah.

¶4. (C) In Pfirter's opinion, Hizballah's stalling tactics to maintain the political stalemate seem to be working, dividing March 14, and increasing Hizballah's influence in naming the

next presidential candidate. Pfirter said the clock is ticking against March 14, and if it does not push forward for a pro-March 14 presidential candidate before November 14, it could lose political cohesion within its ranks and find itself on the losing side of the political equation. The Ambassador agreed that March 14 must maintain pressure to elect a pro-March 14 president to counter the March 8 delaying tactics.

AOUN IS BETTER THAN NO PRESIDENT

15. (C) According to Pfirter, Michel Aoun also sees great benefit in drawing out the presidential election process. Aoun has made his game plan clear, which is to stall the presidential election to such an extent that he becomes the only compromise candidate standing. Pfirter lamented Aoun's election tactics, but in the end preferred an Aoun presidency to the political vacuum of having no president at all. Pfirter remarked, at least Aoun "would have to do something on the issue of disarming Hizballah."

SPEAKER BERRI NEEDS COMPROMISE CANDIDATE

16. (C) Pfirter stated that besides March 14, Speaker Nabih Berri also has a lot to lose if no compromise candidate can be reached. Berri is interested in finding a compromise candidate in order to save his own political position. The longer the presidency remains unfilled, the more power drifts to PM Siniora, especially as long as Berri does not recognize the cabinet and thus cannot call parliamentary sessions in which the cabinet might attend. Pfirter thought that Berri's meetings with MP Saad Hariri were productive in reaching an

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understanding on the selection of a compromise candidate. However, the Ambassador advised Pfirter to be skeptical about Berri's so-called political agreements, whereby if the initiative fails, he blames everyone but himself for reneging on the deal. Pfirter understood Berri's usual tactics and commented that no one, in March 14 or March 8 political circles, is willing to allow Berri to be the sole "kingmaker" in selecting the next president.

PFIRTER: SINIORA MIGHT SEE JOB SECURITY
IN STALEMATE

17. (C) Pfirter said that, in his recent meeting with PM Siniora, it seemed to him that Siniora gave the strange impression that "playing for time might be a good thing." Siniora wants to keep the PM position and the election of a compromise president would eventually lead to the formation of a new cabinet. In Pfirter's opinion, Siniora might be looking over his shoulder at Saad Hariri's ambition to become Prime Minister and feels, in this case, that the delay in the selection of next president might prove more of benefit to him in retaining the PM job than a political curse producing a divided government. The Ambassador said that Siniora has never given us the impression of wanting to retain the position in the current situation.

SLEIMAN NOT THE ANSWER TO THE
PRESIDENTIAL QUESTION

18. (C) Pfirter gave his somewhat negative impressions on Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) General Michel Sleiman and of his chances of being elected as the "compromise candidate." He said that while Sleiman has good instincts for political survival and is a true nationalist, he does not seem to have the strong "intellectual" background required to put forward a clear vision for Lebanon's future that would make him the ideal candidate for president. Also, there is some question about how much public support he really has. Recent polls

show only single digit support for his candidacy, which calls into question whether Sleiman is a true compromise candidate.

CHRISTIANS FORFEITING CHANCE TO
REGAIN POLITICAL POSITION

19. (C) In conclusion, Pfirter reiterated that time is not on the side of March 14. It needs to unite behind a presidential candidate and press its advantage now, or face the consequences of having to accept a compromise candidate that is closely aligned to March 8. Also, he thought the Christians, as a political entity, were passing up a golden opportunity to regain political ground, lost after the civil war years and the Ta'if Agreement, by not being unified. Pfirter stated that the Christian community in Lebanon needs a "moral leader" who can bring Christians together and counter the current Sunni-Shia political dynamic that has developed in the country.
FELTMAN